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ABSTRACT

Volunteering is a vital and widespread activity in the United States; in fact, volunteers perform many essential community functions. Those who believe that most volunteers are women with time on their hands, that volunteers just do "charity work," and that volunteers are a source of cheap labor who can replace paid professionals and thus reduce social service spending are mistaken. In fact, women who volunteer increasingly have full- or part-time employment. Volunteers have a tradition of pioneering social change. Volunteer labor is an effective resource only when there is a strong infrastructure of paid professionals to support its development. The role of volunteers is not to supplant paid professionals, but rather to extend their work. While volunteer organizations can provide leadership and other resources to address community needs, solutions will only be found through coordinated public and private initiatives, including initiatives involving federal, state, and local governments, social service organizations, advocacy groups, the business sector, and funders. (RH)

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Facts About Volunteers

Volunteering is a vital and widespread activity in the United States. According to a 1987 Gallup poll, almost one-half of all Americans volunteer an average of 4.7 hours each week, generating services and resources worth an estimated \$150 billion annually.

Volunteers perform many essential community functions. Imagine a town or city with no PTA, United Way or Red Cross, no auxiliary police or volunteer firefighters, no Girl Scouts, Big Brothers or Little League, no League of Women Voters, Junior League, National Council of Jewish Women, or American Association of University Women, no synagogue or church boards, no Rotary Club, professional associations or political clubs.

Following are some commonly held myths and realities about who volunteers are and what they do.

MYTHS AND REALITIES

MYTH #1: Most volunteers are women with time on their hands.

REALITY: Increasingly, women are volunteering in addition to having full- or part-time paid employment. According to the 1987 Gallup poll, working women actually show a higher rate of volunteering than women not in the labor force. However, the type of volunteer commitments they make have changed. Working women volunteer for fewer hours and are likely to choose volunteer work which is time-limited and can be fit around their work schedules.

A small but significant number of women still choose to be full-time professional volunteers. Devoting their energies to volunteering on a full-time basis enables them to become experts on the issues to which they are deeply committed.

Men are volunteers too. According to the Gallup poll, 44% of all men volunteer in some way (as compared to 47% of all women). In fact, volunteer work has never been the sole province of women. Men have always held unpaid public service positions and have been civically and politically involved in their communities.

MYTH # 2: Volunteers just do "charity" work.

REALITY: Volunteers have a tradition of pioneering social change. Volunteer groups have played significant roles in all of the major social change movements in this country, including the abolition, civil rights and women's movements.

Volunteer organizations act as community brokers. They are in unique positions to develop community partnerships. Their affiliation with ethnic and religious groups, business groups, social clubs, and government agencies, as well as their relatively neutral identities, helps them effectively draw together community interests around particular issues.

Volunteers play important roles in initiating community development and social change. These roles include:

Education. Volunteers are experts at social change because they are able to identify and draw public attention to societal problems and unmet community needs. A notable example of this is *Windows on Day Care*, a national study of child care published by the National Council of Jewish Women (NCJW) in 1972. *Windows on Day Care* was one of the first reports to draw national attention to the shortcomings of the child care system in the United States. The problems NCJW identified 17 years ago continue to be recognized today as issues of national concern.

Community Service. Relatively free of business and government constraints, volunteer organizations can risk supporting new and controversial programs. Many of the most innovative social services have been initiated by volunteers working in conjunction with social service agencies. For instance, the Association of Junior Leagues and NCJW played key roles in passing the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act of 1974, as well as legislation requiring citizen foster care review boards and revising state juvenile justice codes.

Advocacy. Volunteers' lack of self-interest often makes them more credible advocates than paid professionals, who can be seen as having vested interests. For example, volunteer community organizing and advocacy have played a major role in promoting national child care legislation in Congress. Volunteers have consistently worked to make legislation address children's and families' needs. Volunteers' advocacy efforts have been particularly effective because, unlike paid child care professionals, volunteers are not perceived as advancing their own interests.

MYTH #3: Volunteers are cheap labor. Federal and state social service spending can be reduced by replacing paid professionals with volunteers.

REALITY: Volunteer labor is an effective resource only when there is a strong infrastructure of paid professionals to support its development. A recent study conducted by the American Red Cross, *Volunteer 2000*, found that the effective use of volunteer services required financial support. Agencies using volunteers have to provide services such as placement and supervision, pleasant work space, telephones, and typewriters, as well as development incentives such as training and career planning. However, the support is well worth the investment. NCJW estimates that every dollar invested in technical assistance to volunteers generates four dollars in community services and resources.

The role of volunteers is not to supplant paid professionals, but rather to extend their work. For example, Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASAs) are trained volunteers who promote the children's well-being in child abuse and neglect cases. By focusing only on the children, CASAs extend the work of lawyers and case workers. CASAs research and evaluate the circumstances surrounding the case and recommend to the court which decisions are in the children's best interest.

While volunteer organizations can provide leadership and other resources to address community needs, solutions will only be found through coordinated public/private initiatives, including federal, state and local governments, social service organizations, advocacy groups, the business sector and funders.